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What Is Centering Prayer and Is It Biblical?

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Centering prayer is often presented as a form of contemplative prayer, deeply rooted in the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*, a practice of Christian meditation. While centering prayer may seem like a harmless exercise with spiritual depth, it is crucial to examine it against the teachings of the Bible to determine whether it aligns with Scriptural principles.

What Is Centering Prayer?

Centering prayer is a meditative practice where the individual focuses on a single word, often referred to as a *"sacred word,"* and repeats it continuously throughout the prayer session. This word is chosen as a symbol of the person's intention to open themselves to God's presence and action within them. Typically, the practice involves sitting comfortably with eyes closed, gently introducing the sacred word, and returning to it whenever the mind begins to wander.

After centering prayer, the practitioner often transitions into what is known as contemplative prayer, which is described as an opening of the mind, heart, and soul to the influence of God. Proponents of this practice claim it is a way to deepen one's relationship with God by quieting the mind and allowing divine presence to fill the soul.

The Use of Mantras in Centering Prayer

An important aspect of centering prayer that must be considered is the use of the *"sacred word"* in a manner similar to a mantra. In many traditions outside of Christianity, a mantra is a word or phrase repeated frequently as a means of focusing the mind and invoking spiritual or magical powers. In centering prayer, this repetition of a single word can resemble the use of mantras in mystical or Eastern practices.

Some practitioners of centering prayer advocate for repeating the sacred word to empty the mind of all thoughts, with the aim of creating a state of inner stillness where one can become more aware of God's presence. However, this approach to prayer is concerning because it shifts the focus from meaningful communication with God to a technique that is more about altering one's state of consciousness.

Is Centering Prayer Supported by Scripture?

At first glance, centering prayer may seem like a meaningful way to connect with God, but upon closer examination, it becomes clear that this practice has no basis in Scripture. The Bible presents a very different model of prayer, one that is rooted in active communication with God rather than the passive, mystical approach found in centering prayer.

Philippians 4:6 provides clear instruction on how Christians are to approach prayer: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*" This verse emphasizes that prayer involves presenting specific requests to God, coupled with thanksgiving. It is an act of communication, where believers express their needs, desires, and gratitude to God.

Jesus Himself taught His disciples about prayer in John 16:23-24: *"In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."* Here, prayer is depicted as an interaction with God, where believers are encouraged to bring their requests to Him in the name of Jesus.

These passages, and others like them, show that prayer is intended to be a comprehensible, meaningful dialogue with God. It is not about clearing the mind or repeating a single word as a mantra. Instead, prayer is about engaging the mind and heart in communion with God, expressing thoughts, needs, and praises in a clear and deliberate manner.

The Dangers of Mystical Practices in Christian Prayer

Centering prayer, with its focus on repetitive words and emptying the mind, bears a strong resemblance to mystical practices found in other religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, where mantras are used to transcend ordinary consciousness and enter a mystical state. This approach to prayer is not only unbiblical but can also lead believers away from the truth of God's Word and into practices that are more about self-emptying than God-filling.

Isaiah 8:19 warns against seeking spiritual experiences outside of God's ordained means: "*When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?*" While centering prayer is not the same as consulting mediums, it involves seeking a spiritual experience outside the clear teachings of Scripture, which can open the door to deception.

Furthermore, Jesus condemned repetitive prayer in Matthew 6:7, saying, *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."* The repetitive use of a word as a mantra in centering prayer echoes this very practice that Jesus warned against. True Christian prayer is not about repeating phrases mindlessly but about engaging with God in a personal and meaningful way.

The Spiritual Risks of Using Mantras

The use of a single word as a mantra in centering prayer is particularly problematic because it can blur the line between Christian prayer and non-Christian spiritual practices. Mantras are often used in Eastern religions to invoke spiritual powers or to alter one's consciousness, leading the practitioner into a state of heightened spiritual awareness that is detached from rational thought. This type of practice is far removed from the biblical understanding of prayer, which involves a conscious and deliberate relationship with God.
Deuteronomy 18:9-12 explicitly warns against adopting practices from other religions, stating, "*When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who… practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft.*" While centering prayer may not involve direct witchcraft, the adoption of practices like mantras can lead believers into spiritual territory that is outside the bounds of biblical Christianity.

Conclusion: Aligning Prayer with Biblical Truth

In conclusion, centering prayer does not align with the biblical model of prayer. While it may be presented as a way to deepen one's spiritual life, it deviates from the clear instructions given in Scripture regarding how Christians are to approach God in prayer. The Bible calls for prayer to be a thoughtful, sincere, and direct communication with God, not a mystical exercise that borrows from practices outside of the Christian faith. Christians are encouraged to approach God with confidence, bringing their requests and praises before Him with thanksgiving, as Philippians 4:6 instructs. They are also reminded that God hears and answers prayers made in Jesus' name, as stated in John 16:23-24. By following the biblical model of prayer, believers can ensure that their spiritual practices are rooted in truth and lead to genuine communion with God.
It is essential for Christians to discern carefully and align their practices with Scripture, guarding against any influences that might lead them away from the true and living God. As 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reminds us, *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* Let us hold fast to the teachings of the Bible, ensuring that our prayers and practices honor God and reflect His truth.

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